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WALT WHITMAN AND MANHATTAN-NEW YORK

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CRITICS GENERALLY RECOGNIZE WHITMAN'S SPECIAL ATTACHMENT TO urban life. Morton and Lucia White, for example, in *The Intellectual Versus the City*, saw Whitman as a notable exception to the general nineteenth-century rule that American intellectuals were both hostile to and critical of the American city.¹ Oscar Handlin thought of Whitman when he criticized rural idealists who emphasized "the personal hardships of adjustment to city life," and preferred "other observers, whose gaze was fastened on the residents as human beings, [and who] made out a somewhat different pattern."² Whitman was certainly capable of finding the pattern of the urban life he encountered in Brooklyn and New York absorbing, even stimulating. But at bottom his feelings towards what he liked to call, with a characteristic mixture of confidence and anxiety, "my city" were ambivalent. The ebb and flow of this tense relationship contributed to the energy of the poetry in which Whitman's passionate involvement with New York was most fully and compelling disclosed.

This essay first considers the terms on which Whitman felt at home in the city and examines some of the ways he was consequently able to respond positively and creatively to urban life. It then explores the strains that led eventually to the breaking of that contact with the living city upon which his poetry so deeply depended.³

¹Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), 2.

²Oscar Handlin, ed., *The Historian and the City* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), 19. Yet contrast E.H. Miller's remark: "It has been said too loosely and too often that Whitman is the first of the urban poets . . . [T]he settings of his greatest poems are almost invariably rural." See *Walt Whitman's Poetry, A Psychological Journey* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1968), 32.

³This study, concentrating on Whitman's poetry, does not take into account his treatment of the city in stories and articles before *Leaves of Grass*.

* * *

In some of his best work, Whitman drew implicitly upon his early experience of the city that was his home for most of the first forty years of his life. During that period, New York grew from a burgeoning town of less than one hundred twenty-five thousand to a vast metropolitan complex with a population approaching one and a half million by 1870. The young Whitman, a working journalist and editor, was closely involved with the changing life of his city. He understood the social and political consequences of such a radical transformation of its character. He was known, for instance, to have sympathized and to have associated himself with the successive waves of workingmen's movements (parties and unions) that characterized the New York of the twenties and thirties.⁴ These were primarily a reaction to the gradual breakdown of the old social pattern whereby an apprentice could advance to master craftsman and eventually to small entrepreneur. This pattern was destroyed by economic conditions that produced new social classes and divided the population more rigidly into laborers, artisans, merchants, professional workers, and capitalists.⁵ But very little of all this upheaval was at least directly reflected in Whitman's poetry or gathered into his prose recollections. It was not the new urban order but the old that continued to stimulate and direct Whitman's response to his growing city.

It was only after the Civil War that the extreme social consequences of industrial and commercial capitalism attracted Whitman's attention. He reacted with alarm to "the immense problem of the relation, adjustment, conflict, between Labor and its status and pay, on the one side, and the Capital of employers on the other side." It meant

many thousands of decent working-people, through the cities and elsewhere, trying to keep up a good appearance, but living by daily toil, from hand to mouth, with nothing ahead, and no owned homes—the increasing aggregation of capital in the hands of the few . . . the advent of new machinery, dispensing more and more with hand-work.⁶

Yet his best poetry was written before the war. By concentrating on the free

⁴For Whitman's connections with these movements, see Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (London: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1973). The history of the workingmen's movements is found in Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1967).

⁵See Charles A. Glaab and Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York: Macmillan, 1976). Also Pessen, *Uncommon Jacksonians*, 1.

⁶Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1966), II, 753 (hereafter *PW2*). For the broad meaning of the term "labor" see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 31.

play of human energies it suggested a harmonious society in which traditional crafts continued to be practiced and honored.

Whitman's father was a carpenter, Whitman himself a builder as well as printer, and this independent background influenced his depiction of ordinary city working-life in his poems. This is most evident in set pieces where Whitman was presumably drawing directly on his own experience:

The house-builder at work in cities or anywhere,
The preparatory jointing, squaring, sawing, mortising,
The hoist-up of beams, the push of them in their places, laying
 them regular,
Setting the studs by their tenons in the mortises according as they
 were prepared,
The blows of mallets and hammers, the attitudes of the men,
 their curv'd limbs,
Bending, standing, astride the beams, driving in pins, holding on
 by posts and braces, . . . (186).⁷

But the same appreciation of the way in which physical action can become so absorbing as to command, and therefore express, the energies of a human being is evident wherever he described people bending to and blending with their work: "The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel. . . . The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,/ He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blur with the manuscript" (41-42). Such observations are rooted in the particular social, and indeed political, experiences of Whitman's youth and early manhood. But here they grow into a spiritual vision that values people not for conventional reasons but for that precious singularity of life that each possesses. The city was for Whitman the place in which this natural equality of men in their "abundance of diversity"⁸ most torrentially and therefore irresistibly displayed itself.

Seeing people at work in this way allowed Whitman to interweave urban and agricultural work into one magically seamless garment of description. The whole of human society seemed, in its harmonious variety, to be a microcosm of the miraculously integrated living universe. City and country were not hostile opposites or stark alternatives.⁹ They naturally com-

⁷All page references in the text refer to Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Ed. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965).

⁸See A.O. Lovejoy's discussion of the "principle of plenitude" in *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1936), *passim*.

⁹The Brooklyn of Whitman's childhood was in any case a kind of halfway house between these extremes. Whitman himself recalled how "the population was then between 10,000 and 12,000. The character of the place was thoroughly rural." See *PW2*, 774.

plemented each other. Whitman is by turns a "dweller in Mannahatta my city" and "withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess" (15). Both kinds of experience are needed to satisfy the generous scope of man's energies and needs. This approach has the strengths of its considerable weaknesses. It makes no attempt to consider the underlying structure and internal character of an urban society full of growing divisions and conflicts, but it is admirably suited to the uninhibited evocation of the excited and exciting surface of contemporary life. And yet Whitman never really participated in this unpredictable turbulence. He remained an impassioned observer, sustained by the conviction that this disorder was more apparent than real.

For Whitman the aboriginal name of New York—Mannahatta—was a reassuring guarantee of the naturalness and appropriateness of the life of the modern city. "My city's fit and noble name" faithfully evoked the spirit of the geography of the place: "*A rocky founded island—shores where ever gayly dash the coming, going, hurrying sea waves*" (507).

Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane, unruly,
musical, self-sufficient,
I see that word of my city is that word from of old,
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb,
Rich, hemm'd thick all around with sailships and steamships, an
island sixteen miles long, solid-founded,
Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong,
light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies, . . . (474).

In this, Whitman's most spontaneous and best sustained celebration of his city's vigorous diversity, the flood of sights and sounds throughout the seasons (of the soul as well as of the year) was both released and controlled in him by the word, the "specific" name Mannahatta, which "perfectly" comprehended and commanded the whole of the city's life. He was thus able to see this thronging, variegated life as simultaneously uniquely modern and primevally old; an expression of the procreant urge of the world, the restless breed of life, but in the evolved form of a contemporary, proudly democratic society. That society he saw in *Democratic Vistas* as composed of "an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant restoration and vitality."¹⁰ Viewed in this way even the sordid, ugly, and brutal aspects of city life that Whitman acknowledged were redeemed by the energy that flowed in and around

¹⁰Ibid., 362.

them, providing what Whitman called "ventilation." The city epitomized Nature as evolutionary process, "the Great Unrest of which we are part."¹¹

A memorable passage of prose records another important perspective on Whitman's city and offers an alternative avenue of approach to its meaning for him. The "city of hurried and sparkling waters" is also the "city of spires and masts/ City nested in bays! My city" (475)! City life always fell most happily into place for Whitman around his beloved port. About this vigorous, exciting, and adventurous side of commerce he could be unequivocally enthusiastic. New York was seen across wide water, beyond the movement and the masts, the merchandise and the beauty of the ships which directly contributed, and lent an impressive character to its vibrant power and energy. The foreground was "thick" with ferries, coasters, "great ocean Dons, iron-black, modern," and "those daring, careening, things of grace and wonder, those white and shaded swift-darting fish-birds . . . ever with their slanting spars, and fierce, pure, hawk-like beauty and motion," the sloops and schooner yachts. Beyond, "rising out of the midst, tall-topt, ship-hemm'd, modern, American, yet strangely oriental, V-shaped Manhattan, with its compact mass, its spires, its cloud-touching edifices group'd at the centre," all well-blended "under a miracle of limpid delicious light of heaven above and June haze on the surface below."¹²

This strategically chosen vantage point was convenient alike for what it allowed Whitman to see and what it allowed him not to see. It discouraged the nearer acquaintance that might have led to uncomfortable reflections on the motivating forces of all that power and beauty. But it did allow him successfully to reconcile two different, and to him equally important, aspects of Manhattan. New York, in such a romantic vision, rose up effortlessly like a natural form. But it was also recognised and honored as having been raised up, constructed by men, a monument to the ingenuity and endeavours of the masterful modern spirit.

By so conceiving the city Whitman was able, contrary to the experience of many of his contemporaries, to appreciate how it afforded men a physical environment that was neither spiritually oppressive nor dead. Buildings were for him dwellings saturated with human experience. They had absorbed and could exude the essence of the life that they had known: "You flagg'd walks of the cities! you strong curbs at the edges! / . . . From the living and the dead you have peopled your impassive surfaces and the spirits thereof would be evident and amicable with me" (150). The urgent presentness, the jostling coexistence of things and lives in space that

¹¹Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1963), I, 289 (hereafter *PW1*).

¹²*Ibid.*, 170-71.

characterized city living, stimulated Whitman to produce superbly impressionistic passages of poetry:¹³

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, snuff of boot soles, talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite-floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls, . . . (36).

Such profusion and ceaseless ripples of energy were irresistibly attractive to a poet who loved life to be "thick in the pores of my skin" (81). It was what made the city for him the very epitome of modern democratic life: "The present now and here/ America's busy, teeming, intricate whirl" (6).

He loved the simply spectacular and thrilling elements in urban living; the melodrama of the streets was to Whitman as delicious as the drama of the Broadway theatres that he frequented. "I sometimes think," he wrote in a letter in 1868, "I am the particular man who enjoys the show of all these things in New York more than any other mortal—as if it was all got up just for me to observe and study."¹⁴ There is that in Whitman that relished the insobriety in great city life and celebrated its exciting unpredictability. "There have been some tremendous fires," he wrote to Doyle in October 1868, "the [one] in Brooklyn—eight or ten first-class steam engines."¹⁵ The zestfulness of the remark is appropriate to a man who loved "to see the sights. I always enjoy seeing the city let loose, and on the rampage."¹⁶ This, as much as suppressed homosexuality, surely accounted for his sharing the popular enthusiasm of his time for those modern epic heroes, the urban firemen: "young men at the most reckless and excitable age of life, who glory in a fire as soldiers do in a battle."¹⁷ Whitman loved to be one of "the crowd with their lit faces watching, the glare and dense shadows" (187).

His attachment to New York meant that he could embrace several aspects of life that many of his intellectual and artistic contemporaries found intolerable. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman sympathet-

¹³The city was in this respect the natural domain of a poet whose favorite device was parataxis: the arranging of perception side by side in what Hayden White called "a democracy of lateral coexistence, one next to another." White is quoted in Sam B. Girgus, *The Law of the Heart: Individualism and the Modern Self in American Literature* (London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1977), 54.

¹⁴E.H. Miller, ed., *The Correspondence* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), II, no. 310, 2 Oct. 1868. See also the famous passage on Broadway, no. 314, 9 Oct. 1868.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, no. 309, 2 Oct. 1868.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, no. 313, 6 Oct. 1868.

¹⁷A remark made in 1857 by English journalist Charles Mackay, quoted in Bayard Still, ed., *Urban America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 146–47.

ically noted the desolating moments of loneliness that could afflict individuals oppressed by the anonymity of crowds. Yet he made this potentially negative, destructive experience the grounds of a positive and constructive discovery of the uniqueness of the individual soul:

I too felt the curious abrupt questioning stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me, . . .
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was called by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men
as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of
their flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly,
yet never told them a word, . . . (162–63).

On the one hand he registered the vivacity and loving intimacy that there was in this intermingling of lives and close contact of bodies. On the other he deliberately traced the growth of the weary (and potentially despairing, even cynical) suspicion that through it all the essential self remained ingloriously isolated and untouched. Other writers could regard this chilling isolation as irreducible, and sardonically accept the inevitability of having to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.” But Whitman made the experience of separateness into the very ground upon which he was best able to meet his fellow men, and so transformed it into common ground between them and him.

Whitman valued crowded city life not only for its sustaining fellowship, but also because it generated a correspondingly heightened sense of separate identities. It prompted man to confront his essential existence as a soul. This self-realization, when properly matured, permeated and enriched his relationships with his fellows and his world. Furthermore, the city advanced men to related insights into the paradoxical nature of that world. The human currents of the streets suggested the coincidence of fluidity and permanence, as did the flowing river and its tides. Appropriately enough it was here, crossing Brooklyn Ferry, that Whitman was granted the vision of permanence-in-impermanence that came to Wordsworth in the Alps when he first heard “the stationary blasts of waterfalls” and saw the woods “decaying but never to be decayed.”

Whitman’s (mainly unconscious) identification with an older and rapidly disappearing form of urban life did not make him (like Wordsworth in “Michael,” for instance) the elegiast of a dying community. He actively liked what other writers deplored: the fact that human beings in the city were not embedded in deeply traditional forms of life that shaped their personal identities and determined the course of their whole existence. He

liked the approachability of urban man, his relative freedom from binding contracts or commitments of relationship, the way in which he remained malleable enough to receive the stamp of new impressions and free enough to be moved in new directions.¹⁸ The very tone of Whitman's poetry presupposed a milieu in which strangers were at least free to become friends: "I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me,/ You can do nothing and be nothing but what I still infold you" (74).

* * *

Yet Whitman's mastery of this urban world was perhaps more apparent than real. For in his handling of the city Whitman most clearly showed the different and sometimes dangerously contradictory elements in his conception of contemporary America.

In the early *Leaves of Grass* Whitman's hospitality towards all manifestations of energy facilitated his uncritical acceptance of urban life. The impulse was rooted in the romantic delight in the plenitude, mystery, and variety of the created universe. God was imagined as committed to the promotion of a diversity of life, even at the cost of allowing evil to exist.¹⁹ Whitman's genius lay in his accommodating city life within this vitalistic romantic philosophy. And when he was possessed by such a faith he could, particularly in "Song of Myself," trustingly accept "each day's flux and lapse" of city life, confident of discovering "a music of constancy behind/ The wide promiscuity of acquaintanceship."²⁰ It became a field of energy entered by Whitman and explored on the same generous and uninhibited terms that he explored his own bodily self. Whoever "having consider'd the body finds all its organs and parts good, . . . understands by subtle analogies all other theories,/ The theory of a city, a poem, and the large politics of these states" (392-93).

Yet only at his most optimistic was Whitman able to sustain this mode of seeing. It took a white heat of faith to weld the randomness of the quotidian to the transcendental, so as to fashion a credible and durable vision. The 1860 *Leaves of Grass* particularly showed the strain.²¹ True, it not only continued but augmented Whitman's theme of urban pride: "for I think I have reason to be the proudest son alive—for I am the son of the brawny

¹⁸For a sociologist's appreciation of this side of Whitman, see V.W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 203.

¹⁹See Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 34.

²⁰Charles Tomlinson, *Selected Poems, 1951-1974* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 133.

²¹Robin B. Hoople also sees the 1860 version as a crucial step in Whitman's changing attitude to the city. See "Walt Whitman and the City of Friends," in K.W. Cameron, ed., *Scholars' Companion to the American Renaissance*, 1st ser. (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1977), 45-51.

and tall-topt city" (438). The edition featured, in "Mannahatta," Whitman's single most memorable and unequivocal act of homage to his city. Yet at the end of *Chants Democratic* he revealed significantly qualified terms of belief in "the approved growth of cities and the spread of inventions": "They stand for realities—all is as it should be" (487). These realities were "the visions of poets, the most solid announcements of any," spiritual values whose social and political manifestations were freedom and democracy. For and by these standards the city was to stand—or, perhaps, to fall. In trying to knit the visions of poets to the actual growth of cities Whitman was eventually to find himself (in Auden's sardonic phrase) sitting in an expanding saddle. Material and spiritual realities were revealed by time to be inexorably diverging rather than converging.

In *Enfans d'Adam* Whitman was consistently looking away from the present scene and turning towards nature, the West, and the future. The city was securely placed in these redeeming contexts. New inland cities were predicted: "I, chanter of Adamic songs,/ Through the new garden the West, the great cities calling" (107). Whitman wandered through these cities of the future, including his own Mannahatta, satisfied that he had anticipated their development and that they will find him "unchanged" (594). But, significantly, in "Once I Pass'd Through a Populous City," memory can no longer recall the "ephemeral [urban] shows, architectures, customs, traditions": "now of all that city I remember only a woman casually met there who detain'd me for love of me" (109).

This is of course one of the main themes of *Calamus*. There were occasions in that collection when Whitman, fiercely rejecting the public world of the city in favor of his private relationship with his lover, sounded surprisingly like the Arnold of "Dover Beach." The sacred was everywhere besieged by the profane. "City of Orgies" (125) and "A Glimpse" (131) both turn on a dramatic distinction between, on the one hand, a world of "shifting tableaux," "interminable rows of . . . houses," "drinking and oath and smutty jest," and on the other, the "swift, flash of eyes offering me love."

Whitman seemed to draw two different conclusions from these recurring situations during the course of *Calamus*. One was that the world must be accepted, and therefore effectively abandoned, as being of uncertain and perhaps unredeemable character. So Whitman conceded in "Of the terrible Doubt of Appearances" (120) and "I Thought That Knowledge Alone Would Suffice" (595). The other was the determination (sometimes a buoyant conviction) that he could "give an example to lovers to take permanent shape and will through the States" (115). His "brotherhood of lovers" (129) then became a saving remnant, what Hart Crane would later call a "visionary company of love," through whom the modern world, frequently identified with its cities, would eventually be redeemed: "I will

make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other's necks" (610). It was an ideal that naturally sought refuge in (or derived strength from) a dream: "I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth,/ I dream'd that was the new city of Friends" (133). Such a Philadelphia was not, of course, a future structure entirely without foundation in the present. Whitman was building shakily upon those intermittently urban examples of passionate (and therefore inherently exclusive) masculine love commemorated in *Calamus*. Yet there is no avoiding the impression that his future hopes were raised as much on the grounds of disenchantment with the urban present as on this mistaken faith in its potential for growth.²²

The immediate social source of this dissatisfaction by the end of the fifties was almost certainly, as poems in *Drum-Taps* show, New York's reluctance to tackle the problem of the South. A deeper, underlying, and unacknowledged cause was surely Whitman's suspicion that the drift of the modern (as discernible in its most representative city) was not towards, but away from, democracy as he conceived of it. There were occasions when his faith in the city as a natural democratic force failed completely and he could see New York only as the very antithesis of everything he believed in. "The cities I loved so well I abandon'd and left, I sped to the certainties suitable to me" (293). The "Nature" to which he then, in mind if not in body, temporarily retreated was not really a substantial place in which his imagination might settle permanently and thrive. It was insufficiently social to satisfy the multitudinous needs of his simultaneously solitary and gregarious nature. It was invariably with relief—definitively expressed in "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" (312–14)—that he patched up his quarrel and resumed city life: "wherever humanity is most copious and significant—let it all filter into me."²³ "New York loves crowds—and I do too," he wrote with disarming simplicity and frankness. "I can no more get along without houses, civilization, aggregations of humanity, meetings, hotels, theatres, than I can get along without food." He rejected as misanthropic and shallow his previously recorded wish to "live absolutely alone" and "to hear nothing but silent Nature in woods, mountains, far recesses."²⁴

²²E.H. Miller believes there is a nostalgia for pastoral society in *Calamus*. See *Walt Whitman's Poetry*, 150.

²³PW1, 354, 354–55.

²⁴A crucial document is no. 3, 28 Oct. 1849, "Some Poetic Comparisons Between Country and City," in *Letters from a Travelling Bachelor*, first collected in Rubin, *Historic Whitman*, 318–23. Whitman sees fewer strengths than weaknesses in rural life. Coarse and insular, it causes people to age prematurely and to harden, through enforced isolation, into "a singular sort of egoism." Country life is fully as wicked as urban life, with the additional disadvantage that "out of cities the human race does not expand and improvise so well morally, intellectually, or physically."

Yet his outbursts against, and removal of his sympathy from, the city were not simply demonstrations of pique, nor romantic misanthropy. They were rather the result of chronic disappointment, both bitter and sorrowful, at what his city was becoming. Whitman deplored, but reluctantly accepted, the undemocratic fact that city life had produced an aristocracy of wealth. The unrepresentativeness and ineffectuality of such a class was evident in the unease and self-consciousness with which it tried to ape the artifices and conventions of the European gentility.²⁵ But there were other, unmistakably indigenous social forces that posed a very different and grimly serious threat to democratic values as Whitman understood them. He wrestled with the energetic commercialism and dedicated materialism that had made New York what it was by mid-century.²⁶

Attracted as he was to so many aspects of the life generated and sustained by these energies, Whitman was in no position to condemn them roundly. He was quite unable and unwilling to renounce and denounce commercial capitalism and all its works, as Carlyle, for instance, had done. His own mixed, sometimes muddled, and constantly changing reactions to his urban world were the result of not objecting to it on principle, and having therefore to strive repeatedly to discriminate, not always successfully or convincingly, between the shifting positives and negatives in its mercurial character. Whitman's envious admiration of the strength and clarity of Carlyle's unambiguous, untrammelled, and unremitting hostility to modern life was therefore understandable. "His rude, rasping, taunting, contradictory tones—what are more wanted amid the supple, polish'd, money-worshipping, Jesus-and-Judas equalising suffrage-sovereignty echoes of current America?"²⁷

* * *

The outbreak of war brought Whitman's own internal civil war to a head, and then apparently to an end. He could at last openly admit to himself his nagging doubts about his society: "Long had I walk'd my cities, my country roads through farms, only half satisfied/ One doubt nauseous undulating like a snake, crawl'd on the ground before me" (293). And he could do so because he now believed himself to be confident that, like Simeon, his eyes had seen the salvation of his people, Israel:

²⁵PW1, 199.

²⁶For the Jeffersonian tradition of antiurbanism that is relevant here, see the Whites, *Intellectual Versus the City*, and Robert A. Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the U.S.* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), 60–64.

²⁷PW1, 285.

But now I no longer wait, I am fully satisfied, I am gluttied,
 I have witness'd the true lightning, I have witnessed my cities electric,
 I have lived to behold man burst forth and warlike America rise, . . . (293).

In "Song of the Banner," a pre-Sumter poem, he was openly anxious that his city's first and last loyalty might prove to be to prosperity, and therefore peace, at any price. When the North eventually declared war, it also, in Whitman's eager eyes, declared itself to be firmly for democracy and the union. His relief is evident in the rapture of his welcome for New York's mobilization in "First O Songs for a Prelude" (279–80). Thereafter he continued to protest his pride in his martial city and his excitement at its aroused and purposeful energy: "Manhattan streets with their powerful throbs, with beating drums as now" (314). When he went to Washington, the "big-city boy" in him came out occasionally: "this city is quite small potatos after living in New York." Even the frankly commercial spirit of his home city now seemed to him healthy compared with bureaucracy-ridden Washington, whose grand public buildings were white elephants. He yearned for "the oceans of life and people" that characterized New York.²⁸

But his misgivings were too fundamental and substantial ever to evaporate completely. New York trade thrived callously on the war. Whitman noted on a wartime visit home how "here in all this mighty city every thing goes with a big rush and so gay, as if there was neither war nor hospitals in the land. New York and Brooklyn appear nothing but prosperity and plenty."²⁹ And it is noticeable that even in the poem where the current of his pride in wartime New York runs most strongly, there is still a considerable undertow of doubt about the way in which it might choose to use its prodigious strength:

City of ships!
 (O the black ships! O the fierce ships!)
 (O the beautiful sharp-bow'd steam-ships and sail-ships!) . . .
 City of the sea! city of hurried and glittering tides!
 City whose gleeful tides continually rush or recede, whirling in
 and out with eddies and foam!
 City of wharves and stores—city of tall facades of marble and iron!
 Proud and passionate city—mettlesome, mad, extravagant city (294)!

No passage from Whitman's poetry better captures his fascination,

²⁸*Correspondence*, II, no. 333, 12 Dec. 1868.

²⁹*Correspondence*, I, no. 94, 9 Nov. 1863.

amounting almost to a hopeless infatuation, with the beauty and dangerous energy of his city. The hyperbolic phrases are designed to flatter and appease, to secure its morally ambivalent power for the democratic cause in this war.³⁰

Whitman emerged from the war determined that he had been convinced of the glory of the American future. This optimism was different from, more willed than, the visionary idealism that produced the great poetry of the fifties. A contributing factor may have been the imperative need that Whitman felt after 1865 to believe beyond all possibility of doubt that all the pain and suffering that he had helplessly witnessed had not been in vain; that the death throes of soldiers were also the birth pangs of a forthcoming, united, democratic nation. Most of Whitman's diminished energy during the last twenty years of his life must have gone into the effort of preserving, in the face of a disfigured rather than transfigured world, the equilibrium of this optimism that was for him a matter of life or death. The price he paid was the severing of that vital connection between his visionary imagination and the "rude, coarse, tussling facts of our lives and their daily experiences"³¹ upon which his poetry so deeply depended, and to which his involvement with his city had contributed so much. He retired, as *Specimen Days* shows, to Nature; "the only permanent reliance for sanity of book or human life."³²

* * *

And you lady of ships, you Mannahatta,
Old matron of this proud, friendly, turbulent city,
Often in peace and wealth you were pensive or covertly frown'd
amid all your children,
But now you smile with joy exulting old Mannahatta (282).

In calling New York by the name of Mannahatta, Whitman was doing much more than exhuming the old poetic device of personification. Mannahatta was New York as it revealed its essential self to the favourite son who was, at least in his creative fantasy, on such lovingly familiar and uniquely intimate terms with it. Insofar as it is often for Whitman a kind of redeeming and long-suffering archetype of New York, Mannahatta has something of the imaginative status of Blake's vision of transfigured London, Jerusalem. It is appropriate that Whitman should, out of his own family struggles as well as his poetic needs, have imbued his city with such a personality

³⁰I discuss these last points more fully in "Whitman and the American Democratic Identity Before and During the Civil War," *Journal of American Studies*, 15 (1981), 73-93.

³¹PW2, 479.

³²PW1, 120.

precisely at the time when many Americans were beginning to identify themselves with their cities in a new way. Urban historians have noted how, around the middle of the century,

notions of the "general interest" emerged in debates about the proper competitive course for their city to pursue; the railroad or the canal was desired, or was talked about as desired, not just by this or that group of aggressive Baltimore or Philadelphia businessmen but by "Baltimore" or "Philadelphia." In this way the cities acquired public images, indicating that they possessed one or another set of individual characteristics.³³

Whitman's Mannahatta would seem to stand in an interesting and challenging relationship to such calculated processes of "community personification," motivated more by commercial ambitions than real love.³⁴ But after the war Whitman's Mannahatta grew increasingly distant from the actual historical New York.

"Human and Heroic New York," Whitman called it in *Specimen Days*; and the eulogistic passage so entitled was a convenient summary of the quintessential Americanness of that city as, in his increasingly wilful optimism, Whitman was capable of seeing it even as late as the 1880s. He found "the human qualities, of those vast cities . . . comforting, even heroic, beyond statement."³⁵ The citizens were possessed of

alertness, generally fine physique, clear eyes that look straight at you, a singular combination of reticence and self-possession, with good nature and friendliness—a prevailing range of according manners, taste and intellect, surely beyond any elsewhere upon earth.³⁶

Blank assertion reinforced by blustering rhetoric seemed to be the order of the day as Whitman tried, with a desperation more often comic than poignant, to convince himself by convincing others that contemporary New York was a city animated by the spirit of democratic comradeship.

His idealism no longer grew spontaneously from a heightened appreciation of the potential of contemporary life. It existed only in simple, empty defiance (or perhaps obdurate ignorance?) of the facts. Unlike Blake or Shelley, Whitman could not make great poetry out of the glowing materials provided by the visionary imagination alone. He was no constructor of

³³Glaab and Brown, *Urban America*, 36–37.

³⁴He preferred not to use the name "New York," partly because it originated with the "tyrant" Duke of York, later James II. "A pretty name, this, to fasten on the proudest and most democratic city in the world!" See C.J. Furness, ed., *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (New York: Russell and Russell, 164), 61.

³⁵PW1, 171.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 171–72.

alternative worlds. More literal-minded than they, he remained dependent upon the inspiring eloquence of real life; even "the hard, pungent, gritty, worldly experiences and qualities in American practical life."³⁷ When those ceased to speak to him, or at least when they began to speak in a foreign language, Whitman was left marooned in his dreams, incapable of writing authentic poetry and driven to barren prophecy.

By the time Whitman came to write "Human and Heroic New York," the passion had gone from his affair with the city, and had been replaced by pious, wishful sentimentality. He himself sensed the change early. "I am well as usual," he wrote in September 1867 to friends in Washington,

and go daily around New York and Brooklyn yet with interest, of course—but I find the places and crowds and excitements—Broadway, etc.—have not the zest of former times—they have done their work, and now they are to me as a tale that is told.³⁸

Yet powerful poetry had arisen from the violent psychological pattern of his longstanding lover's relationship with New York, from his bitter, periodic revulsions against the city and his subsequent reconciliations, and from his alternating feelings of trust and betrayal.

After the war, prose became Whitman's primary medium of expression as his poetry faltered and failed. In *Democratic Vistas* he made his supreme effort to reconcile his aspiration for, and belief in, a golden age of American democracy, with what he permitted himself to see of the cynical opportunism of the Gilded Age. And when he came to balance the pros and cons of his contemporary society, to take the weight of its character and try justly to estimate its quality, he turned to his most recent experiences of New York, confident that it would, as always, faithfully epitomize for him both the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary America. The result is a splendidly full disclosure—honest even perhaps beyond Whitman's conscious intentions—of his conflicting feelings about his city.

He showed remarkable self-knowledge when he remarked how the vigorous, ample life of the great cities "completely satisf[ies] my senses of power, fullness, motion, etc., and gives me, through such senses and appetites, and through my aesthetic conscience, a continued exaltation and absolute fulfillment." Kindled, his rhetoric swelled to a diapason of praise:

I realize (if we must admit such partialism) that not Nature alone is great in her fields of freedom and the open air, in her storms, the shows of night and day, the

³⁷*Correspondence*, II, no. 362, 23 April 1870.

³⁸*Correspondence*, I, no. 249.

mountains, forests, sea—but in the artificial the work of man too is equally great—in this profusion of teeming humanity—in these ingenuities, streets, goods, houses, ships—these hurrying, feverish electric crowds of men, their complicated business genius (not least among the geniuses), and all this mighty, many-threaded wealth and industry concentrated here.³⁹

But then aesthetic appreciation was ousted by the moral sense. Whitman obeyed its stern injunctions to shut his eyes “to the glow and grandeur of the general superficial effect.” He searched minutely for “*men* here worthy the name,” for “crops of fine youths, and majestic old persons,” for the arts and manners of a “great moral and religious civilisation—the only justification of a great material one.” His conclusion was “that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms playing meaningless antics.”⁴⁰

As in this passage the moral eventually prevails over the “aesthetic,” so too in Whitman’s life did the moralist quench the poet. New York, one gradually realizes as one reads, was judging Whitman as surely as Whitman was passing judgment on New York. The poet’s ideal men and women are thin and anaemic creatures compared to so “thick and burly”⁴¹ a world of unregenerates as that magnificently established in the first paragraph.

Whitman’s tragic dilemma as a poet was clear. His imagination intuitively recognized its true home (“I don’t wonder you like and are exhilarated by New York and Brooklyn—They are the only places to *live*,” the crippled Whitman wrote from Camden in 1878⁴²). It craved that uninhibited, but not indiscriminate, contact with the teeming life of the city and the times that produced the gloriously fresh poetry of the early years. But the older Whitman, ailing as well as aging, and (in spite of his protests to the contrary) palpably mistrusting the energies that animated contemporary life, could not any longer give his imagination his unqualified support and blessing. He retreated to the consolations of the ideal under the pretence of advancing to the future⁴³; or else he turned, like so many disappointed social revolutionaries before and after him, away from the recalcitrant

³⁹PW2, 371.

⁴⁰Ibid., 371–72.

⁴¹William James’s phrase to describe a world inadequately served by the “shiveringly thin wrappings” of transcendental idealism. See *A Pluralistic Universe* (London: Longmans, Green, 1909), 136.

⁴²E.H. Miller, ed., *The Correspondence* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1964), III, no. 863, 10 May 1878.

⁴³Of course Whitman from the first envisaged the ideal democratic society as a city of great personalities (e.g. “Song of the Broad-Axe.” secs. 4 and 5, *LG*, 186–90); but this served his poetry best when it stimulated rather than (as later) inhibited his appreciation of the actual contemporary life of New York.

material of a social and political world to the much more amenable world of the spirit. Somewhere along the road leading away from his estranged city he lost his shaping spirit of imagination.

There is, however, a touching postscript, which comes in the form of a remark made in a letter he wrote in 1889, very near the end of his life.

Suppose you and Nelly have rec'd your big book by this time—I can hardly tell why, but feel very positively that if any thing can justify my revolutionary utterances it is such *ensemble*—like a great city to modern civilisation, and a whole combined paradoxical identity a man, a woman.⁴⁴

Although it was to the rank profusion of natural life that Whitman had, with a sure instinct, turned for a title for his life's work he could not, at the end, forbear from also thinking of *Leaves of Grass* as a kind of city. It is perhaps his last, unconscious, and most appropriate tribute to the hold of "tumultuous, close-packed, world-like New York"⁴⁵ over his creative imagination.

⁴⁴E.H. Miller, ed., *The Correspondence* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969), IV, no. 152, 5 March 1889.

⁴⁵*Correspondence*, II, no. 317, 17 Oct. 1868.